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Political Trust and Polarization

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Abstract and Keywords

Trust in government in the United States has become increasingly polarized along partisan lines. Republicans and Democrats are now quite reluctant to trust government when the other party is in power. This chapter explores the sources and consequences of polarized political trust. Analysis of panel data suggests that polarized trust is the result of negative affect toward opposing partisans and a motivated reasoning process in which partisans place greater weight on the evaluative criteria that favor their preferred political party. The chapter further shows that polarized trust has important consequences for individuals' policy preferences. We explain how the polarization of political trust has contributed to ongoing political dysfunction in Washington. In particular, the results suggest that the polarization of trust encourages party leaders to do what is best for their political party even if it is not best for the larger public interest.

Keywords: political trust, polarization, gridlock, motivated reasoning, partisanship, Congress

PARTISAN polarization among lawmakers in Washington has increased sharply in recent years (Lee 2009; Theriault 2008). As polarization has reached new heights, congressional productivity has reached new depths. The 112th and 113th Congresses, which served from 2011 to 2014, were the least productive ones on record (Binder 2014; Terkel 2012), with the 114th on pace at the time of this writing to be similarly sluggish. Such unproductivity and political dysfunction can be quite costly. For example, Congress's inability to forge a budget compromise in 2013 automatically triggered a policy of sequestration, a painful round of mandatory cuts in Medicare, discretionary domestic spending, and cuts in the defense budget. A government shutdown followed later that same year, with an estimated cost to the economy of \$24 billion and losses of about 120,000 jobs.

The American public is uniquely positioned to rein in legislators and put the brakes on partisan and ideological excesses in Washington. Since representatives rely on public support to secure reelection, they have powerful electoral incentives to listen to public opinion (Mayhew 1974). Yet the public has done little to discourage elite polarization in Washington. Why? Is it because the American electorate is just as ideologically polarized as Washington elites? It doesn't seem so; public opinion surveys have repeatedly found that the policy preferences and ideological predispositions of average citizens are not particularly extreme (Bafumi and Herron 2010; Clinton 2006; Fiorina et al. 2005). Although most Americans may not be polarized in their *policy preferences* or *ideology*, a growing body of evidence suggests that they are polarized in their *feelings* about their political opponents (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Huddy, Mason, and Aaroe 2015; Iyengar, Sood, and Lelkes 2012; Iyengar and Westwood 2015; Mason 2015, 2016). Simply put, the American public is currently experiencing a state of affective polarization in which Republicans and Democrats dislike each other to an unprecedented degree.

(p. 580) Over the last decade, Americans' increasingly hostile feelings toward their political opponents have engendered a new and politically consequential type of polarization—the polarization of political trust along partisan lines. Republicans and Democrats are now much less likely to trust the federal government when the opposite party controls it. This development is of consequence because political trust is a critical commodity in democratic societies in that it helps bridge the ideological gap that inevitably exists between policy ideas of the governing party and those of the opposition party. Polarized trust inhibits the formation of public consensus on public policy because it reduces the willingness of citizens to sacrifice their ideological proclivities for the common good (Hetherington and Rudolph 2015). As a result, political leaders struggle to gain support for government programs in an environment in which political trust is both polarized and low. The polarization of political trust has, we believe, contributed significantly to the ongoing political dysfunction in Washington.

In this chapter we will explore the polarization of political trust within the United States. First, we will analyze the relationship between partisanship and political trust over time in an effort to document the emergence of polarized trust. Second, we will use individual-level panel data to help explain when and why political trust became polarized along partisan lines. Third, we will demonstrate the far-reaching policy consequences of polarized trust by showing the effects of political trust on public support for a range of programs. Finally, we connect our findings about ordinary Americans to the decisions that political elites make in Washington. Specifically, the polarization of trust allows minority party leaders to do what is best for their political party even if it is not best for the larger public interest.

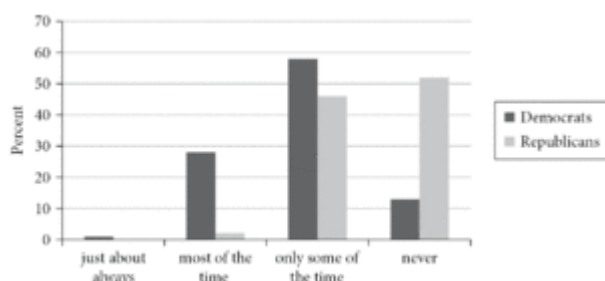
The Emergence of Polarized Trust

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Since the 1950s, public opinion surveys have regularly asked the American people how much they trust the federal government. Respondents have most commonly been asked the following question: “How much of the time do you think you can trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?” For nearly fifty years, the correlation between political trust and partisanship was only modest at best. Republicans expressed slightly higher levels of trust than Democrats under a Republican president, and Democrats voiced slightly higher levels of trust than Republicans under a Democratic administration (Hetherington 2005).

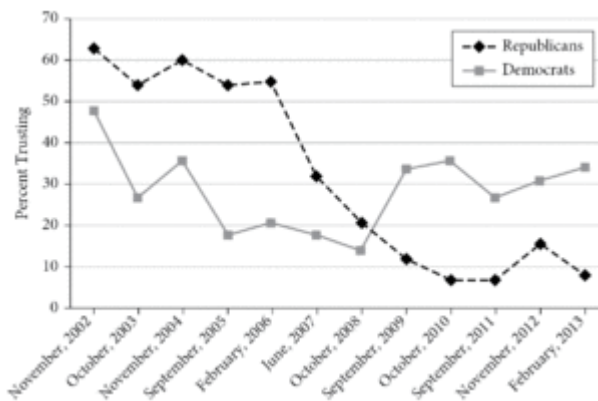
The relationship between political trust and partisanship has undergone a fundamental transformation since the dawn of the twenty-first century. To illustrate this transformation, Figure 24.1 uses data from the 2010 Cooperative Congressional Election Study (CCES) to display the distribution of responses to a trust-in-government instrument. The results are striking. A majority (52%) of Republicans reported that they “never” trusted the government in Washington to do what is right. A sizable percentage (46%) (p. 581) of Republicans said that they trusted government “only some of the time.” Only 2% of Republicans reported they trusted government “most of the time,” and not a single Republican respondent in the survey said that he or she trusted government “just about always.” Democrats, by contrast, expressed much higher levels of trust. Only 13% of Democrats reported that they “never” trusted the government to do what is right. Nearly one-third (29%) said they trusted government at least “most of the time.” The results in Figure 24.1 are indicative of a public in which political trust is remarkably polarized along partisan lines.

How did we get to this point? When did political trust become so polarized? The trend lines displayed in Figure 24.2 shed some insight on these important questions. Figure 24.2 tracks the level of political trust expressed by Republicans and Democrats at multiple intervals between 2002 and 2013. In the wake of the terrorist attack on (p. 582) September 11, 2001, both Republicans and Democrats expressed high levels of political trust. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Republicans said they trusted government at least “most of the time.” Even though Republicans controlled the White House and the House of Representatives in November 2002, almost half (48%) of Democrats said they trusted government at least “most of the time.” Not only did many members of both parties trust government but also the partisan gap in political trust was relatively small.



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Figure 24.1 Trust in Government by Party, 2010



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Figure 24.2 Political Trust by Partisanship, 2002–2013

The warm glow of national unity experienced in the months following September 11th did not last for long, as the polarization of political trust was well underway by the close of 2004. By September 2005, Democrats' trust in government plunged to 18%, while Republicans' trust remained quite high

at 54%. This pattern continued into 2006, as only about one-fifth of Democrats trusted government while more than half of Republicans did. This yawning partisan gap in political trust made it difficult for President George W. Bush to build public support for signature initiatives such as Social Security privatization and comprehensive immigration reform (Rudolph and Popp 2009). With little trust, Democrats in the electorate would not buy into the GOP's ideas.

Figure 24.2 also reveals that this pattern quickly reversed soon after the election of Barack Obama as president. By October 2010, Democrats' trust in government had rebounded to 36%, which has been around the norm for Democrats, regardless of which party occupies the White House, since the 1970s. Republicans' trust in government, on the other hand, had plummeted to only 7%. As we will demonstrate later in this chapter, the near-complete absence of trust among Republicans worked against key Obama agenda items, such as health care reform and an economic stimulus (Popp and Rudolph 2011). Although both ultimately passed, the legislative process was so bruising that it undermined the efficacy of both initiatives.

Explaining the Polarization of Political Trust

The preceding results have established that the early 2000s experienced a remarkable polarization of political trust along partisan lines. But why? Why did political trust become so responsive to individuals' partisanship? As detailed in this section, we believe there are at least two contributing factors. First, longitudinal survey data suggest that partisans increasingly dislike the opposing political party. Second, we argue that partisans, when forming their trust judgments, now engage in a motivated reasoning process in which they see the world as much worse than partisans used to when their party was out of power and place greater weight on the evaluative criteria that favor their

preferred party. Working together, these processes help to explain the emergence of polarized political trust.

More than ever before, partisans don't like the opposing political party. It might not be too much of a stretch to say that they actually hate the opposition. The National Election Study has regularly asked ordinary Americans to rate various social and political groups from 0 to 100 on a thermometer scale. Very low scores suggest deep dislike; (p. 583) and very high scores suggest a very positive affect, with 50 degrees a neutral point. In the 1980s, partisan dislike of the opposition was not particularly intense. During the Reagan administration, for example, the average rating of the Democratic Party among Republicans was 45 degrees, and the average rating of the Republican Party (also referred to as the GOP) among Democrats was 44 degrees. This pattern held relatively steady for a couple decades. Feelings toward the opposition party became a bit more negative by 2000, as the average rating of the Democratic Party among Republicans fell to 38 degrees while the average rating of the Republican Party among Democrats fell to 41 degrees, but these scores were still not too far from the neutral point of 50 degrees.

This trend toward negative feelings accelerated after that. By 2008, Republicans' average rating of the Democratic Party dropped to 34 degrees and Democrats' average rating of the Republican Party sank to 30 degrees. During the first term of the Obama administration, negative feelings toward the opposition party intensified even more. A 2011 YouGov survey found that Republicans gave the Democratic Party an average rating of 18 degrees. Democrats returned the favor, giving the Republican Party the same average rating of only 18 degrees. Such negativity toward the opposition party is quite striking from a historical perspective. These icy thermometer ratings are comparable to those that Americans used to reserve for widely unpopular groups like "urban rioters," "marijuana users," "radical students," and "black militants" in the 1970s.

Partisans' increased hostility toward the opposing party helps to explain the recent emergence of polarized political trust. People are typically unwilling to trust people and institutions they dislike. Researchers have shown that people are more likely to view members of their own social groups as more trustworthy than nongroup members because they are perceived to be more like them than are outsiders (Uslaner 2012). This same logic can be applied to trust in the federal government. Partisans who do not identify with the president's party are now very unlikely to express much trust in the government. When members of one party are reluctant to trust government because it is controlled by the other party, the polarization of political trust along partisan lines is an inevitable consequence.

A second factor that has contributed to the polarization of trust is rooted in a decision-making phenomenon known as motivated reasoning. Motivated reasoning is a decision-making practice in which individuals process information or evidence in a biased way so as to enable them to reach a preferred judgment or conclusion (Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013; Redlawsk 2002; Rudolph 2006; Taber and Lodge 2006). Put in more plain

terms, it is a biased mode of thinking that allows people to see the world, including the political world, as they wish to see it.

Motivated reasoning can influence political trust judgments in a pair of related ways. First, partisans may evaluate government performance more favorably when their party is in power and less favorably when the other party is in charge. Because trust is a function of people's perceptions of government performance, this will move one side's trust scores up and the other side's down. Consider how this process works with the economy. Even though Republicans and Democrats experience the same *national* economy by virtue of living in the same *nation* as each other, they evaluate those conditions differently based on whether their party is in power (Bartels 2002; Gerber and Huber 2010). If Republicans are (p. 584) in power and the economy is experiencing modest growth, for example, Republicans in the electorate might perceive it to be quite strong while Democrats might view it as somewhat lackluster. If Democrats were in power, by contrast, Democrats might perceive the same economy as strong while Republicans might rate it as rather weak. In short, motivated reasoning can bias perceptions of government performance. Since perceptions of government performance are a key determinant of political trust judgments (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008), partisan bias in such perceptions can lead to polarized trust.

In addition to directly influencing performance evaluations, motivated reasoning can also influence political trust judgments by influencing the weight that people assign to different evaluative criteria when forming their trust judgments. Partisans are expected to act as biased information processors who selectively focus on information that favors their political friends and disfavors their political foes. If the economy is strong but the nation is mired in an international conflict under a Republican administration, for example, Republicans are expected to place more weight on the economy and less weight on foreign policy when rendering political judgments such as political trust or presidential approval. Our theory of motivated reasoning thus generates two specific hypotheses. First, when Republicans are in power, we expect that they will evaluate various conditions better than will Democrats. Second, we also expect that Republicans will place greater weight on the most favorable evaluations and less weight on the least favorable evaluations when forming their trust judgments. Democrats, by contrast, would be expected to place greater weight on less favorable criteria when making trust judgments.

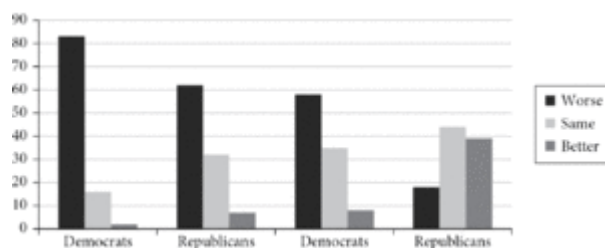
Partisan Perceptions of Government Performance

We turn first to the question of whether there are partisan differences in individuals' assessments of economic and foreign policy performance. Figure 24.3 reports Republicans' and Democrats' perceptions of economic performance in both 2002 and 2004. As can be seen in Figure 24.3, the data suggest that individuals' subjective economic perceptions are colored by their partisan attachments. From an objective standpoint, economic conditions in 2002 were far from robust. Unemployment was rising,

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real income was declining, and gross domestic product (GDP) growth fell below 2%. The economic boom of the 1990s was a fading memory. Republicans were hardly sanguine about the economy, as 62% of them thought the economy had gotten “somewhat” or “much” worse over the previous year. Among Democrats, however, that figure was substantially higher at 83%. By 2004, the economy was rebounding. Unemployment was falling and economic growth had increased to nearly 3%. Consistent with our first hypothesis, such improvement was viewed quite differently by Republicans and Democrats. Among Republicans, 39% felt that the economy had gotten better while only 18% thought it had gotten worse. Democrats perceived a different economic world, as 58% thought the economy had gotten worse while only 8% thought it had gotten better.

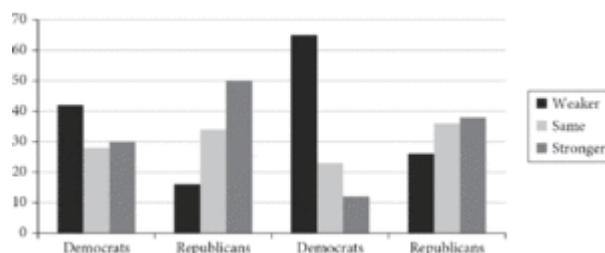
As shown in Figure 24.4, partisan bias is also evident in individuals’ assessments of foreign policy conditions. In 2002, the United States had experienced some successes on the international stage. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks, a broad “coalition of (p. 585) the willing” helped the United States achieve a quick military success in Afghanistan. With a Republican administration in charge of Washington, Republicans were inclined to believe that the nation’s place in the world had grown stronger over the past year. Indeed, 50% of Republicans felt that America’s position in the world had grown stronger. Democrats were less optimistic in their assessment, as only 30% shared this view. By 2004, as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq started to bog down, the partisan gap in foreign policy assessments had grown even larger. As shown in Figure 24.4, 65% of Democrats felt the country’s position in the world was weaker while only 25% of Republicans shared that sentiment. In fact, a plurality of Republicans still felt that the nation’s position had gotten stronger. These growing differences ought to move Republicans’ trust in government up and Democrats’ trust in government down.



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Figure 24.3 Perceptions of Economic Performance over the Past Year, 2002, 2004

Source: American National Election Studies, 2000–2004 Panel Study.



[Click to view larger](#)

Figure 24.4 Perceptions of Foreign Policy Performance over the Past Year, 2002, 2004, by Party

Source: American National Election Studies, 2000–2004 Panel Study.

The gulf between Democrats' and Republicans' evaluations of objective economic conditions has only

widened over time. Indeed, data from the most recent American National Election Study (ANES), collected in 2012, seems to indicate that partisans live in completely different worlds. In 2012, the economy had been growing steadily for three straight years. Of course the doldrums of 2007–2008 had been intense. But there was not an objective (p. 586) economic indicator in 2012 that suggested a deteriorating economy. The worst one could say is that conditions were not improving fast enough for Americans' taste, which might lead them to answer the classic national retrospective economic evaluation question by saying that the economy had "stayed about the same." Objectively, however, the correct answer was that the national economy had improved. It had definitely not gotten worse.

Democrats perceived it correctly. In 2012, just under 50% of Democrats thought the national economy had gotten better over the past year. A shade under 35% thought it was about the same. Fewer than 20% of Democrats erroneously thought the economy had gotten worse. Republicans were apparently living in a parallel universe. Fewer than 10% of them perceived the economy as getting better, and well over 50% perceived it as getting worse, with the rest seeing it as staying the same. Put more succinctly, 40 percentage points fewer of Republicans than Democrats (correctly) saw the economy as better, and 40 percentage points more of Republicans than Democrats (incorrectly) saw the economy as worse.

In 1988, the first year scholars discovered this form of partisan-motivated reasoning (Bartels 2002), there were partisan differences to be sure. This time it was Democrats seeing the economy less positively than Republicans, with Ronald Reagan finishing his second term in office. But the key finding is that the amount of motivated reasoning was only half as large (20 percentage points) in 1988 and 2012. The difference between 1988 and 2012 on foreign policy assessments is even larger than on the economy. In that sense, not only does partisan-motivated reasoning exist, its effect appears to have doubled in recent years. This will drive down trust among out-party partisans while driving up trust among in-party partisans. The result is deeper polarization in political trust.

Partisan Weighting in the Formation of Trust Judgments

We turn next to the question of whether people engage in partisan weighting of government performance evaluations when forming their trust judgments. To test our hypotheses, we employ panel data from the ANES. The 2000–2002–2004 ANES panel is particularly well suited for our purposes. In addition to including the requisite measures of political trust, this ANES panel asked people to assess both economic and foreign policy performance. This will permit us to observe whether Republicans and Democrats

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assess performance differently and whether they differentially weight those assessments when making their trust judgments. Importantly, the panel component of the data allows us to examine whether trust judgments change over time and, if they change, why they do so.

Table 24.1 reports the results of a regression model in which we examine the determinants of change in political trust from 2000 to 2002. We use panel data from the 2000–2004 ANES to help us make more reliable inferences about the causes of trust judgments. The model controls for a number of important variables, including presidential approval, congressional approval, feelings toward each political party, and demographic traits. Of central interest in this analysis, though, are the effects of individuals' economic and foreign policy evaluations on political trust.

The results suggest that both Democrats and Republicans engaged in partisan weighting of performance evaluations. Not only did Democrats perceive a weaker economy in (p. 587) (p. 588) 2002 than did Republicans, as we showed above, but also the results in Table 24.1 show that they placed much greater weight on their economic perceptions in forming their trust judgments than did Republicans. We observed earlier that Republicans were more likely than Democrats in 2002 to perceive strong foreign policy performance during the Bush administration. The results in Table 24.1 indicate that Republicans weighted their positive foreign policy evaluations heavily in rendering their trust judgments while Democrats did not incorporate foreign policy evaluations into their trust judgments at all.

Table 24.1 Change in Political Trust as a Function of Partisan Assessment, 2000–2002

	Democrats	Republicans
Political Trust ₂₀₀₀	0.599 (0.048)	0.481 (0.058)
Foreign Policy Evaluations ₂₀₀₂	0.038 (0.028)	0.082 (0.034)
Economic Evaluations ₂₀₀₂	0.180 (0.059)	−0.044 (0.062)
Feeling Thermometer—Democratic Party ₂₀₀₀	0.044 (0.056)	−0.009 (0.075)
Feeling Thermometer—Republican Party ₂₀₀₀	0.132 (0.054)	0.146 (0.081)

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Presidential Approval ₂₀₀₀	−0.082 (0.036)	0.002 (0.030)
Congressional Approval ₂₀₀₀	0.026 (0.024)	0.038 (0.028)
Race (African American)	−0.050 (0.033)	−0.406 (0.282)
Gender (Female)	0.006 (0.022)	0.044 (0.026)
Education (Some College)	0.023 (0.027)	−0.045 (0.032)
Education (College)	0.012 (0.033)	−0.003 (0.036)
Education (Graduate School)	0.030 (0.048)	−0.058 (0.042)
Age	0.000 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Constant	0.076 (0.059)	0.065 (0.081)
Number of Cases	296	266
Adjusted R ²	.42	.28

(*) $p < .05$, one tailed test

Source: American National Election Study, 2000–2004 Panel Study.

Table 24.2 Change in Political Trust as a Function of Partisan Weighting, 2002–2004

	Democrats	Republicans
Political Trust ₂₀₀₂	0.577 (0.042)	0.556 (0.047)
Foreign Policy Evaluations ₂₀₀₄	−0.042	0.088

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	(0.030)	(0.028)
Economic Evaluations ₂₀₀₄	0.118 (0.046)	0.049 (0.051)
Presidential Approval ₂₀₀₂	0.015 (0.021)	0.088 (0.051)
Congressional Approval ₂₀₀₂	0.015 (0.020)	0.061 (0.025)
Race (African American)	0.038 (0.027)	−0.188 (0.064)
Gender (Female)	0.034 (0.019)	−0.043 (0.022)
Education (Some College)	0.027 (0.023)	−0.006 (0.026)
Education (College)	0.038 (0.029)	−0.009 (0.030)
Education (Graduate School)	0.058 (0.041)	0.049 (0.037)
Age	0.002 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Constant	−0.125 (0.040)	0.017 (0.064)
Number of Cases	307	330
Adjusted R ²	.48	.42

(*) p<.05, one tailed test

Source: American National Election Study, 2000–2004 Panel Study.

Table 24.2 reports the results of a similarly specified regression model in which we examine the determinants of change in political trust from 2002 to 2004. Evidence of (p. 589) partisan weighting can again be seen by examining the types of evaluations Democrats and Republicans used to update their trust judgments. Democrats updated their trust judgments by focusing on their largely negative economic perceptions.

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Republicans, by contrast, updated their trust judgments by concentrating on their largely positive evaluations of foreign policy performance. Collectively, this pattern of results provides support for the proposition that trust judgments are shaped by partisan-based reasoning.

The Consequences of Polarized Trust

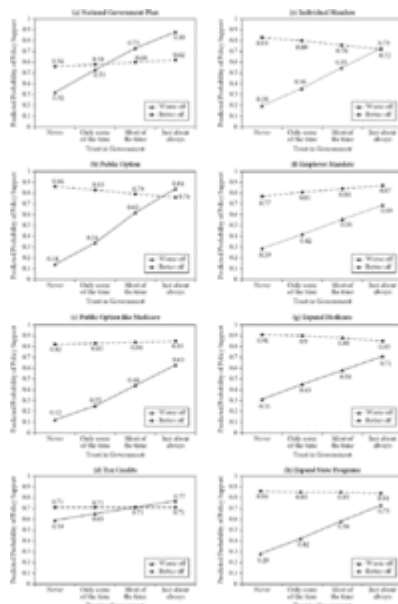
The polarization of political trust carries the potential for profound political consequences. Political trust functions as a useful heuristic that enables citizens to make policy judgments in a less effortful and more efficient manner. Complex policy decisions are reduced to simple questions of trust. People are more likely to reject a policy when they perceive its architect to be untrustworthy and are more likely to support a policy when its architect is perceived to be trustworthy (Hetherington 2005). The effects of political trust on individuals' policy judgments are expected to be particularly pronounced among those for whom policy support requires either material or ideological sacrifice (Hetherington 2005; Hetherington and Globetti 2002; Hetherington and Rudolph 2015; Popp and Rudolph 2011; Rudolph 2009; Rudolph and Evans 2005; Rudolph and Popp 2009). In this section, we demonstrate the consequences of polarized trust by showing how it can influence public support for health care reform and foreign intervention.

We begin by examining the effects of political trust on public support for eight specific health care reforms that were considered during the debate over the Affordable Care Act. Informed by previous findings from the trust literature (Hetherington 2005), we generally expect that political trust will be positively associated with support for government-sponsored health care reforms. We anticipate that the effects of trust will be greatest among those who believe that such reforms will require them to sacrifice their material interests. To test these hypotheses, we estimate models of support for eight health care reforms using survey data from a 2009 Kaiser Health Tracking Poll. To streamline the presentation of those results, Figure 24.5 displays the effects of political trust and perceived material sacrifice on the predicted probability of support for each of the eight health care reforms. Figure 24.5 consists of eight separate panels, one for each of the eight health care reform proposals. Within each panel, we graphically depict the effects of political trust on policy support for those who believe that the reform will make their family worse off and for those who believe the reform will make their family better off. In essence, each panel illustrates the effects of political trust among those for whom policy support requires a perceived material sacrifice and among those for whom it does not.

A cursory inspection quickly reveals a recurring pattern across seven of the eight panels. Among those for whom policy support does not require a perceived material sacrifice, the effects of political trust are negligible to nonexistent. However, among those who believe the specified reform will make their family worse off, the effects (p. 590) (p. 591) of political trust are both statistically and substantively significant. As political trust increases from low to high, public support for a national government-sponsored health plan increases by 56 percentage points. A similar rise in political trust increases support for a public option plan and a public option like Medicare by 70 and 51 percentage points, respectively. When political trust rises from low to high, public support for the individual mandate, employer mandate, expansion of Medicare, and expansion of state programs

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like Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program increases by 53, 40, 40, and 45 percentage points, respectively. On only one reform proposal, tax credits to buy private insurance, does political trust fail to exert any influence.



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Figure 24.5 Effect of Political Trust by Material Sacrifice and Reform Proposal, April 2009

Polarized trust also has implications regarding public support for foreign intervention. Support for increased government intervention abroad is buoyed by public trust just as public support for increased investment on domestic issues like health care is lifted up. Using panel data from the 2000–2004 ANES, we find that political trust is an important determinant of individuals' foreign policy preferences. People who trust government were

more likely to think that both the war in Iraq and the war in Afghanistan were worth it. Using cross-sectional data, we find that political trust is positively associated with a number of additional foreign policy attitudes. People who trust government were more likely to believe the war in Iraq reduced terrorism, to believe it is important to have a strong military, to support increased defense spending, and to support increased spending on the War on Terror.

We also find that the effects of political trust on support for such policies are greater among those for whom such support requires a greater ideological sacrifice. Support for increased defense spending, for example, requires a greater ideological sacrifice on the part of liberals than it does on the part of conservatives. This implies that the effects of political trust should be more pronounced among liberals than among conservatives. That is precisely what we observe. For each of the six foreign policy issues noted above, the effects of political trust on policy support are greater among liberals than they are among conservatives. On average, political trust increases policy support by 4.5% among conservatives and by 11.7% among liberals. These results suggest that political trust is a valuable resource that can help to build support for a conservative foreign policy agenda. When trust is polarized along partisan lines, however, there will be precious few liberals who trust a Republican-controlled government. As a result, polarized trust can make it very difficult to build bipartisan support for foreign intervention.

From Micro to Macro

The study of mass behavior in general, and political trust in particular, is, to us, only significant insofar as these studies provide us with some purchase on politics. When we use the term “politics,” we have in mind the definition that Harold Lasswell (1936) made famous nearly a hundred years ago, “who gets what, when, and how.” One of the unfortunate developments in our subfield is the increasing distance between micro-level (p. 592) findings (what is going on in the brains of ordinary Americans) and macro-level findings (who gets what, when, and how). In *Why Washington Won't Work*, we endeavored to connect the trends in trust in government that we identify to the shape and nature of the political dysfunction political commentators commonly observe in Washington.

Our argument about the importance of political trust for understanding gridlock starts from the fact that the last several Congresses have been the least productive since scholars have been keeping data on congressional productivity. Polarization between the congressional parties is a key source of this gridlock (Binder 2014). However, the public, at least in terms of issues and ideology, is not polarized like the members of Congress (Fiorina et al. 2005). This makes sense because people need to care about politics to develop strong issue commitments and overarching ideological predispositions. More than five decades of scholarship make clear that most Americans do not care much. Hence it is unrealistic to think that ordinary Americans would be polarized along policy or ideological lines. Instead we have been experiencing what amounts to “leapfrog democracy” over the last couple of decades (Bafumi and Herron 2010). We go from having majority parties in Congress that are either far to the right or far to the left of public opinion without ever stopping in the middle where the public is. What is puzzling is why the public does not demand greater moderation from those who represent them in Washington.

In connecting the micro-level story (ordinary people) to the macro-level story (who gets what), it is critical to assess the incentives that officeholders have in the present political context. One of the most important recent developments in the study of Congress has been Frances Lee's (2009) work on changing minority party behavior in an era characterized by close partisan margins. From the late 1950s through the 1980s, the Democrats' majorities were so large that Republicans could never expect to win the majority in the next election, at least not in the House. Indeed, the Democrats held the majority in the House of Representatives for 40 straight years, from 1954 to 1994. When the minority party cannot hope to win the majority in the next election, it has incentives to compromise. It might not get close to everything it wants, but at least it will get “part of a loaf.” That approach to governance characterized American lawmaking for many decades.

The Republican Revolution in 1994 changed the calculus for the minority party. When the GOP seized power, it did so with a narrow majority. The stunned and suddenly minority party Democrats believed they could retake the majority and all the perks that go along with it in the next election. The same was true of the Republicans after the Democrats finally retook the majority in both houses in 2006. Rather than compromise, minority parties began to believe it in their interest to bring the legislative process to a halt. The reasoning went that, if the minority party compromised, the majority party would get the credit for any successes, which would undermine the minority party's case that it ought to be the majority party after the next election. Because it is the party in charge, moreover, the majority would likely get blamed for the gridlock that the minority party caused, which would, perversely, aid their case to the voters in their efforts to take the majority in the next election.

(p. 593) Never was this approach to “governance” any clearer than in Barack Obama’s first term. Although the economic collapse of 2007–2008 under George W. Bush’s leadership provided Democrats with relatively large majorities in Congress in 2009, the two Republican floor leaders in Congress (Representative John Boehner in the House and Senator Mitch McConnell in the Senate) decided their respective caucuses would not provide any meaningful support for the president’s program. The rank and file in both houses followed their leaders. This did not have an enormous effect in the House of Representatives where bills can be passed with simple majorities. But, in the Senate, changes in norms pressed by Republicans during this period meant that passing almost all legislation would require 60 votes. This meant at least some Republican support for any Democratic initiatives would be required for final passage of a bill. That is why, for example, the fiscal stimulus that was required to confront the Great Recession was much smaller than Democrats hoped for. Minority Leader McConnell surmised, almost certainly correctly, that Obama and the Democrats would get credit for any success that followed, which would undermine the GOP’s case to the voters in 2010 that they should be the majority party. Looking back with nearly a decade of perspective, the strategy of gridlock seems to have worked to the GOP’s advantage. The Republicans retook the House majority in 2010 in one of the biggest electoral sweeps of the last 100 years, making Boehner the Speaker. And, by 2014, McConnell was no longer Minority Leader but rather Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate.

Next, we need to connect these changing incentives of elected officials to the micro-level story about political trust. The key to that part of the story is that Republicans who distrusted the government in Washington to do what is right were reluctant to support Obama’s major policy initiatives. We show throughout the latter chapters of *Why Washington Won’t Work* that conservatives who trusted government were willing to follow the president’s lead on matters like health care reform, government stimulus, and so forth. But there were few of them. Recall the data in Figure 24.1 that only the smallest handfuls of Republicans expressed trust in government. The 95-plus percentage of them who distrusted the government offered almost no support at all.

This is a critical point when we return to the incentives of Republican members of Congress. More than 40 years ago, David Mayhew (1974) termed members of Congress “single-minded seekers of re-election.” The logic of his argument was that members do not get to make policy after they lose at the ballot box. To avoid defeat, they pay a lot of attention to what members of their constituencies think. As Aldrich (1995) points out, however, not all members of representatives’ districts are equally important. Most central to them is their reelection constituency. In this period of unprecedented party polarization in voting behavior, this means that Democratic members of Congress will attend almost exclusively to the preferences of Democrats in their districts, and Republicans will do the same with the preferences of Republicans in their districts. Partisans are thus more unlikely to vote for members of the other party.

Recall from the preceding discussion that distrust in government causes conservatives not to support Democrats’ policy initiatives. That is because, without trust, Republicans in the electorate are unwilling to make ideological sacrifices. Without (p. 594) much support for Obama’s program among Republicans in the electorate, Boehner, McConnell, and the members of their legislative caucuses did not have to worry about their reelection constituencies being angry with them for gridlocking the legislative process when they had to face the voters in the next election. Unlike when Ronald Reagan was president in the early 1980s, when trust was higher and a large percentage of Democrats supported his program, Obama’s program had no such crossover appeal. Whereas Democrats in Congress in the 1980s had to worry about losing support from fellow Democrats in the electorate who liked Reagan’s program, Republican members in the 2000s had no such worry. They could gridlock with impunity.

Although Americans often say they want their members in Congress to make sacrifices, it does not seem to be true, at least not in the present context. When partisans deeply distrust the government run by the other party, they do not really want their party’s representatives to work with the other side. Instead, what they want is for the other side to capitulate to their views. Taken together, deep and intense distrust of government allows the minority party to govern in an ideologically extreme way without alienating their ideologically indifferent constituencies.

Losers and Winners

When gridlock grips Washington, the result is not neutral. The consequences will almost certainly fall disproportionately on the have-nots. Borrowing from Schattschneider (1960), it is the have-nots who need government to redress the inequalities built into any capitalist system. The haves would rather keep political conflicts private, which favors maintaining the status quo. Had Obamacare not been enacted, for example, those at the top of the income ladder might not have noticed. But the more than twenty million formerly uninsured Americans, disproportionately drawn from the lower rungs of the economic ladder, would have been the worse for it. Indeed, it is noteworthy that, as gridlock has become a regular feature in modern American politics, income and wealth inequality have reached their highest points since the government started to track such measures in the 1940s. Clearly polarized trust has negative implications for those who would benefit from more government innovation.

Although reactions to these changes have differed by race, the evidence is that the working class, whether white or minority, has fallen further behind economically over time. Especially worrisome, Case and Deaton (2015) find life expectancy rates actually dropping among whites with less than a college education, an unprecedented development in modern American life. They point to both declining economic fortunes and drug and alcohol addiction as root causes. This points up that working-class Americans regardless of race might benefit from a well-functioning government that redistributes wealth more. In contrast, wealthy economic interests have been well served by things like low upper-bracket tax rates, the elimination of the estate tax, and deep cuts in (p. 595) capital gains taxes, which is the type of governing that is possible in a low-trust environment. A distrustful public is always happy to see taxes eliminated whether or not this action actually benefits them (Bartels 2008).

Conclusion

Not all that long ago, scholars didn't even consider the effects that political trust had on the American political system. In the 1950s and 1960s, trust was high and relatively constant across the population. When trust began to drop in the late 1960s, a trend that lasted throughout the 1970s, the scholarly focus was on why trust was dropping, not on what impact declining trust might have. Over the last 20 years, however, scholars have identified a wide range of measures affected by trust in government. Political trust is, without doubt, politically relevant.

We argued in *Why Washington Won't Work* and summarized here why the polarization of political trust is fueling the political dysfunction that has infected Washington of late. Trust became polarized because of increasingly negative views that partisans developed

about the other political party, the increased tendency of partisans to engage in partisan-motivated reasoning, and a newly identified tendency of partisans to engage in partisan weighting of politically relevant conditions. We suspect the key change is the negative feelings that partisans have about the other side, which pushes trust down among out-party partisans when the other party is in power. The increase in negative feelings is almost certainly behind the increased effect of partisan-motivated reasoning. These days it is almost as though Republicans and Democrats live in different worlds, with one seeing up as down while the other sees down as up. The end result is that Republicans' and Democrats' trust evaluations grow further and further apart.

Completely lacking trust in government, out-party partisans do not support the president's party's initiatives. Doing so would require an ideological sacrifice from them, and sacrifices require trust. But with little trust among those with ideologies that differ from the president's, vanishingly few will provide him or her leeway. That means that opposition leaders in the House and Senate can grind the legislative process to a halt without fear of retribution from their reelection constituency. With voting behavior so polarized by party, Republicans who represent Republican-leaning districts do not have to worry about the preferences of Democratic voters. The same is true of Democrats who represent Democratic-leaning districts. Absent some major shock to the political system, polarized trust will continue to hamstring the government's ability to solve problems. The impact of this situation is almost certainly asymmetric. Democrats and political liberals want government to do more, and Republicans and conservatives want government to do less. In either case, however, polarized political trust is a central reason why Washington no longer seems to work.

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